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Paul Robichaud

The poetry of David Jones negotiates between a variety of British and Irish cultures, traditions, and geographies. While the verbal texture of his poems weaves together the linguistic diversity of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Latin cultures, Jones is especially attentive to the role of place (or “site”) in shaping relations between them. His poetry maps out these relationships with precision and historical depth. Both *The Anathemata* and *The Sleeping Lord* dramatize what John Kerrigan has termed an “archipelagic” understanding of the interactions between cultures across Britain and Ireland. Jones’s poetry and essays offer their own tentative, imaginative recovery of what Kerrigan calls “the long, braided histories played out across the British-Irish archipelago.”¹ Indeed, Jones’s writings might together comprise the most “archipelagic” body of work in British and Irish modernism. To read David Jones in this way is to reconsider how his writing represents particular geographies and histories in relation to the Irish and British Isles as a whole. His poetry and prose imaginatively remaps the islands, making Wales and the Irish Sea historically and culturally central, challenging their traditionally peripheral status in relation to England. If Kerrigan’s notion of the archipelagic can deepen our understanding of Jones’s vision of Britain and Ireland, that vision in turn brings to it new historical, religious, and even geological depth. The early Middle Ages, as a time prior to the establishment of English hegemony in Britain, take on new importance in this reading of Jones’s work. His poetry and prose foreground the importance of Celtic Christianity in creating a shared spirituality and culture spanning the Irish Sea and linked with the wider European world across the Channel.

Islands and seas form the environmental basis of Jones’s vision of Britain and Ireland, and the symbolic and allusive dimensions of his poetry never lose contact with their raw materiality. John Brannigan, in his recent study, *Archipelagic Modernism*, argues that “despite the general cultural tendency towards seeing islands and seas in figurative terms, there has been a strong counter-tradition in twentieth-century anglophone literature, perhaps especially in that modernist and late modernist literature associated with symbolism and metaphorical modes of representation, of reading them from resolutely material perspectives.”² For David Jones, matter is infused with spirit, but he is “resolutely material” in presenting the islands and seas of

the British and Irish archipelago as the geological basis for the societies and cultures that developed there. Culture is created, in Jones's view, through the making of signs that recall some other material, cultural, or spiritual reality. His sacramental theology recognizes our nature as embodied creatures: "We are committed to body and by the same token to Ars, so to sign and sacrament."³

In his "Preface" to *The Anathemata*, Jones welcomes the addition of a scientific, materialist understanding of water as a further enrichment of its cultural and religious significance: "A knowledge of the chemical components of this material water should, normally, or if you prefer it, ideally, provide us with further, deeper, and more exciting significances *vis-à-vis* the sacrament of water, and also, for us islanders, whose history is so much of water, with other significances relative to that. In Britain, 'water' is unavoidably very much part of the *materia poetica*."⁴ The water surrounding Britain is "material water" but also a "sacrament" that possesses "other significances" for the various peoples who inhabit the Island. Its materiality is thus conjoined with sacramental and associative meanings that enrich its physical reality and determinative power in shaping British cultures.

In "Rite and Fore-Time," Part I of *The Anathemata*, geology and geography anticipate or shape later cultural differences and relationships within the archipelago. Jones describes in turn the geological formation of the Welsh mountains, the splitting apart of Ireland and Wales, the relationship between the formation of Scotland and Wales, and the separation and formation of Ireland and Scotland. Geographically, Wales is imagined at the center of an archipelago connected by the Irish Sea, with a peripheral England to the south and east. Apart from a few scattered topographic allusions, the only specifically English references here are to the rivers Severn and Dee. The latter

must marl her clear cascade-locks in dawdling Stour's
English bed

and she

must glen her parthenogenic waters a shorter cut by Gwen-
frewi's well, before she comes to Wirral. (*TA* 70)

This re-centering of British and Irish geography on Wales and the Irish Sea foregrounds the subsequent interrelationships between the Celtic regions and their inhabitants in the early Middle Ages: Irish raiding and settlement in Wales; the arrival in Gwynedd of the *Gwŷr y Gogledd* (the "Men of the North") from the old northern Brittonic kingdoms; and the Irish foundation of the kingdom of Dál Riata, which spanned the North Channel to

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join modern County Antrim with Argyll.⁵ As John Brannigan observes, “the social and cultural connections of the people who live in the archipelago always exceed the limits of state or national formations, and...the spatial imagination of maritime zones may encompass some of those connections more fully than land zones.”⁶ Jones brings to this spatial imagination historical and geological depth. He thus describes the pre-Glacial geological periods as “Before the Irish sea-borne sheet lay tattered on the gestatorial / couch of Camber,” emphasizing the shaping role of the Irish sea in the early geography of Wales (*TA* 67). More comprehensively, he dramatizes how the Irish Sea transported glaciers from the Isle of Man to Anglesey and from the Scottish Highlands to Arfon:

Before, trans-Solway
and from over Manannan’s *moroedd*, the last debris-
freighted flocs echeloned solid from Monapia to Ynys Fôn
discharged on Arfon *colles*
what was cargoed-up on Grampius Mons. (*TA* 70)

Formally, the repetition of the *-an/on* sound in *Manannan*, *Monapia*, *Fôn*, and *Mons* creates an aural link that parallels the geographical connection provided by the Irish sea. (The near-rhyme of *Fôn* and *Mons* is nearer than it seems: the *f* in the Welsh *Fôn* is really a mutated *m*; in Latin, *Ynys Fôn* is *Insula Mona*.) Jones’s use of Irish, Welsh, and Latin names points to the future mixing of cultures around the Irish Sea, while “freighted,” “discharged,” and “cargoed-up” evoke the economic links of maritime shipping. The sites of Ynys Fôn (Anglesey) and Grampius Mons were both locations of Roman victories under the Roman general Agricola, according to Tacitus. Anglesey saw the final defeat of the British druids; at Mons Graupius (the actual site of which is disputed), Agricola defeated a Caledonian chieftain named Calgacus, whose death prefigures later Celtic defeat throughout the islands. Calgacus, in the speech given him by Tacitus, decries Roman imperialism in language that would be echoed by both Augustine and David Jones: “To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desolation and call it peace” (“*auferre trucidare rapere falsis nominibus imperium, atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*”).⁷ Augustine, in Book IV of *The City of God*, echoes the charge leveled by Calgacus with his rhetorical question, “And so if justice is left out, what are kingdoms except great robber bands?” (“*Remota itaque iustitia quid sunt regna nisi magna latrocinia?*”).⁸ Jones in turn revises Augustine in “Middle-Sea and Lear-Sea,” when the goddess Ilis laments, “’Tis a great robbery—/ is empire,” after being raped by Mars (*TA* 88). For Calgacus as for Ilis, there is no justice in

empire. Jones's choice of place-names not only emphasizes a shared Celtic culture on the shores of the Irish Sea but also reminds us of its violent suppression by the Roman Empire.

Rome is, however, instrumental in transforming North Wales through the immigration of peoples following the same route as the glaciers, "out of Caledonia / into Cambria / bound for Snowdonia," crossing Cumbria along the way. This Brittonic migration from Caledonia to Cambria is led by "the Lord Cunedda" who "came south over the same terrain and / by way of the terrain-gaps then modified or determined: for / the *viae* are not independent of geology" (TA 71). Geology, itself shaped by the movement of glaciers, determines the movement of peoples across Britain, particularly along the *viae*—the Roman roads. Following the scholarship of his day, Jones believed that Cunedda's migration was organized under Roman auspices.⁹ He thus envisions Cunedda's "hobnailed *foederati*" scraping "from their issue *caligae* the mud of Forth into Conwy," literally bringing the soil of Caledonia into Cambria (TA 71). Jones uses place names to convey the transformation and to point to the strata of common Celtic place names throughout the island: "Clyde into Clwyd" (TA 71). He stresses the Roman character of the migration with Latin names that evoke the rapidly vanishing province of Britannia; Cunedda's tribe of Gododdin is rendered by the Latin "Otadini," while Gwynnedd is "Venedotia." As earlier in this section, Jones foregrounds the relationship between Ireland and Wales as Cunedda's influence extends southwestward: "even in Irish Demetia / a Cunedda's Hill" (TA 71).

Jones covers much the same ground, or territory, in "The Sleeping Lord" (1966–67). As the priest of Arthur's court recalls the dead, his mind drifts from the saints to rulers and warriors, then on to more legendary figures like "Cunobelinos the Radiant" (Shakespeare's Cymbeline) and "the Blessed Bran."¹⁰ From there, the priest recalls, "the names of men more prosaic but more credible to him," semi-historical figures whom Jones identifies with specific geographical locations, following Welsh tradition. These include Cunedda Wledig and his father, "Paternus of the Red Pexa," as well as "the Count Ambrosius Aurelianus that men call Emrys Wledig, associated, by some, with the eastern defences called the Maritime Tract and Aircol Hir and his line, *protectores* of Demetia in the west."¹¹ Between them, Emrys and Aircol protect the eastern seaboard from the Saxons and the western from the Irish and Picts. Jones's choice of the Latin *protectores* emphasizes the origin of their roles in the Roman defense of Britain. Ambrosius Aurelianus, for example, was "Count of the Saxon Shore" (*Comes Littori Saxonici*). As the priest's thoughts turn from "the many, many more whose bones lie under the green mounds of the Island," he reflects on the many beautiful and powerful women of the past, "whose bodies lie as hers for whom was digged

the square grave on Alaw-Bank in Mona Insula.”¹² In the priest’s vision, the whole of Britain becomes a kind of tomb, commemorating the dead in the many “green mounds” found throughout the Island. The unnamed woman buried “on Alaw-Bank” in Anglesey (“Mona Insula”) is Branwen, heroine of the Second Branch, whose grave (*Bedd Branwen*) is traditionally located at a bronze-age site on the river Alaw. Other women commemorated by the priest include “Creiddylad the daughter of Lear” and “Elen, the daughter of Coil, lord of Stratha Claudia between the Vallum and the Wall.”¹³ These female figures hover uneasily between history and legend and between human and divine. For Jones, they reflect an archetypal feminine power linking past with present. He offers a similar catalogue in “Epithalamium,” which includes “Guenever, Elaine, with / both the Iseults” among other figures.¹⁴ Creiddylad is the Welsh Cordelia, while Elen is a more shadowy figure, perhaps identical with the Elen who was Welsh goddess of roads. “Coil,” the prototype for “Old King Cole” of nursery-rhyme fame, ruled the northern Brittonic kingdom of Strathclyde (“Stratha Claudia”), whose territory was located between the Antonine and Hadrian’s Walls. Geographically, this part of the priest’s recollection takes us from southwest Wales to southeast England, to Anglesey and Strathclyde, foregrounding the island’s status as a geographical unity. Throughout “The Sleeping Lord,” with its repeated allusions to “the Island,” there is an acute awareness of Britain’s insular unity prior to its being divided into multiple nations—a division implicitly alluded to in Jones’s naming of Lear and his daughter.

The repeated use of “the Island” to describe Britain draws on Welsh tradition, in which Britain is referred to simply as *Yr Inys*, “the Island” or described as *Ynys y Cedryn*, “The Island of the Mighty”; unmoored from this tradition in English, the phrase appears to foreground Britain’s most basic geographical reality. Nonetheless, Jones is well aware that any such imagining of Britain as a single entity brings with it a considerable freight of historical baggage. In “Wales and the Crown” (1953), Jones recognizes that “the Island” in ancient Welsh tradition is primarily a political ideal rooted in nostalgia for Roman Britain, with fatal consequences for Welsh independence. He argues that it is because the origins of Wales “were tied up with the end of a Romanic Britannia that later Welsh tradition was haunted by the concept of the primacy of the ‘crown of London’, over and above the actual primacy of honour allowed in the written Welsh codes to the prince of Gwynnedd.”¹⁵ In practice, this meant that the medieval Welsh princes were unable to create a unified kingdom, for the notion of sovereignty was associated with “the Island” as a whole and not with Wales itself. In Jones’s vision of Welsh history, “this tradition of the conceptual unity of the Island was the ideological cause (there were many others too) of a factual disunity

in Wales.” Burdened with an ideology that held the princes of Gwynnedd merely “first among equals,” the Welsh princes “owed allegiance only to a concept, which was termed by the poets *Unbenyaeth Prydein*, the Monarchy of Britain,” a concept the English kings were only too willing to exploit. Wales is an accidental survival from “what had been the Diocese of Britain” in the later Roman Empire. This accident explains the enduring Welsh loyalty to the ideal of Britain as “the Island” but also defines its uniqueness among the peoples of Britain: “For quite unlike the Scottic, Pictish, Saxon and Angle Kingdoms which arose as forces exterior to and as invaders of the disintegrating provinces of the Empire, Wales arose from within the disintegration.”¹⁶ Jones’s comments from the early 1950s are made in the context of the disintegration of the modern British Empire and chime with the political vision of an independent Wales advocated by his friend Saunders Lewis, founder of Plaid Cymru.

In imagining Wales and the Irish sea as a kind of archipelagic center, where peoples and cultures mix and influence one another, Jones responds directly to those who feel disappointment in the lack of material evidence for a distinctly Welsh culture in the formative early Middle Ages. In “Wales and Visual Form,” he argues that such “misunderstanding [...] resides in our not fully realizing the position of Wales geographically, its construction geologically and its consequent historical situation in relation to the successive vital movements which have spread from various centres in prehistoric or historic times.”¹⁷ Wales is at the crossroads of many cultures, and Jones draws particular attention to “the cross-current from Ireland, clearly influential in the case of Wales; for Ireland at certain periods of history and prehistory developed techniques and forms of real importance, and the late Bronze Age Irish gold work found its way into Wales and England and elsewhere.”¹⁸

In recalling Ireland’s ancient role as a source for artistic “techniques and forms of real importance,” Jones invites us to reconsider our assumptions about the direction of cultural influence across the islands. In “Welsh Poetry,” a review of Gwyn Williams’s *Introduction to Welsh Poetry*, Jones notes the Irish influence on the development of medieval Welsh poetic form, while lamenting the Norman hegemony that blocked this stream of influence: “The links between Wales and Ireland were especially close in the twelfth century, and it is known that the metrical forms of Ireland were influential in Wales during the development of the *Gogynfeirdd* poetry. So this was an art doubly ‘Celtic’ in character. But after 1172 the English grip on Ireland put an end to this fruitful Irish-Welsh relationship.”¹⁹ The art-forms that develop across the Irish Sea through a mixing of distinct traditions achieve at their best a perfect union of content and form. Considered as art, what matters

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about the poetry of the *Gogynfeirdd* is not its “doubly ‘Celtic’” character per se, but its achievement of aesthetic unity. Nonetheless, it is precisely that “doubly ‘Celtic’” character that reveals the specific cultural, historic, and geographical circumstances that are unique to twelfth-century Wales and Ireland. Jones observes in “The Myth of Arthur” that the final blow to this relationship came a century later, in 1284, when “Anglesey was occupied from an English fleet which blockaded all the Welsh coast from Chester round to Cardigan bay, thus the Celtic sea, the ancient liaison with Ireland, which had been useful to the Welsh in times of crisis, and vivifying to Welsh poetic and musical forms, was severed.”²⁰ Through military force, the connective power of the sea becomes a barricade, isolating societies that were formerly in contact with one another.

The fruitful twelfth-century relationship between Ireland and Wales recalls the even more crucial interactions that followed the arrival of Christianity in late Roman Britain. Jones’s poetry and prose explores the ways in which the spread of Christianity opened new channels of transmission and influence across the islands. British missionaries evangelized Ireland, Irish missionaries converted the Picts, and continental missionaries brought Christianity to the English; in turn, Irish monks also revitalized Christianity in Britain and on the Continent. Jones notes in “Wales and Visual Form” that “Following upon this monastic and evangelistic enthusiasm there was a considerable artistic resurgence, affecting to various degrees almost the whole of the British islands.”²¹ The insular style of swirling and interlacing lines associated with stone crosses throughout Britain and Ireland and the manuscripts produced on the monastic isles of Iona and Lindisfarne represent a confluence of all these cultures, and, as Jones argues, “It will not do at all to refer to this plastic outburst as ‘Celtic’—it was not only very mixed in its expression, but the derivations of the motifs used are complex and connect up with forms found from the Adriatic to the North Sea.”²² Insular decorative style thus gives expression to the mixture of motifs derived from Classical, Germanic, and Celtic traditions as these intertwined with each other across the archipelago.

The shared Celtic Christian culture of Ireland and Wales is symbolized for Jones by a fantastic meeting out on the Irish Sea, which he describes near the end of “The Myth of Arthur”: “In the eleventh-century *Life of St. David* by Rhygyfarch of Menevia, St. Brendan, the navigation saint, ‘leading a wondrous life on a marine mammal’ meets in the middle channel of the Irish sea, the Irish abbot Barre returning from his pilgrimage to the Tomb of the Apostles, by way of St. David’s community in South Wales. He, Barre, is riding on David’s abbatial horse, now become, by marvel, sea-horse. Brendan hails his fellow wanderer and fellow athlete with these

words: *Mirabilis Deus in Sanctis suis*.”²³ The episode symbolizes for Jones the transformation of “the strayed horses of Lancelot” into “creatures symbolic of the new enthusiasms and resurgence from Celtic lands”;²⁴ the military horsemanship of post-Roman Britain gives way to a newly militant spirituality, but one with genuine feeling for the natural world and rooted in the particular geography of Ireland and Wales. The Irish Sea is here a liminal space where Ireland and Wales meet but also a liminal space where heaven and earth are joined in the miracles of the early Celtic saints. Such a meeting is only possible because of the geological, historical, and cultural development that Jones traces in *The Anathemata*. In his prose as in his poetry, Divine Providence unfolds on a vast scale before and after the Crucifixion, but is recognizable in moments such as the meeting of Brendan and David.

South of the Irish Sea, the area of the Atlantic joining Ireland, Wales, and Cornwall, linking the English Channel to the East with St. George’s Channel and the Irish Sea to the North, has been the site of rich material and cultural connections both within the archipelago and between it and the Continent. It is this area that Jones refers to as “Lear-Sea” in Part II of *The Anathemata*. The name “Lear” evokes multiple associations in Irish and British mythology. Originally, the name likely described a shared Celtic deity who may have personified the sea itself: the Irish Lir is the father of the sea-god Manannán, after whom the Isle of Man is named, while the Welsh Llŷr is the father of Manawydan, Bendigeidfran, and Branwen, who appear in the Second Branch of *The Mabinogion*, a tale with multiple sea-journeys between Ireland and Wales.²⁵ Throughout this section, Jones maps the southwestern contours of Britain, naming the waterways that join Britain to the Continent and to its adjacent isles, particularly the Scillies and Ireland:

where Môr Iwerddon meets
 Mare Gallicum
 where the seas of the islands war with the ocean, to white
 the horse-king’s *insulae*
 to blanch
 main and Ushant. (TA 97-8)

Naming the Irish Sea in Welsh (*Môr Iwerddon*) and the English Channel in Latin (*Mare Gallicum*) evokes the linguistic situation of the early Middle Ages, with the Celtic resurgence in Britain and the persistence of Latin in Gaul. Jones’s other naming in this passage alludes to the legend of Tristan and Iseult, itself a primal archipelagic myth spanning Ireland, Cornwall, and Brittany, with Saint Michael’s Mount as a central point. His note identifies “the horse-king” with Mark, whose name in Welsh, *March*, means stallion;

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his “*insulae*” are the Scillies. The phrase “to blanch / main” evokes the figure of Iseulte aux Blanche Mains, daughter of Hoel of Brittany, whom Tristan marries after being banished from Cornwall by King Mark. Brittany itself is represented in this passage by the isle of Ushant, its northwestern-most point. Jones’s linguistic choices and literary allusions emphasize the connective role of the sea in bringing together the various Celtic cultures of Brittany, Cornwall, and Ireland. That this passage describes the voyage of a Greek ship further links the Celtic maritime world with the Mediterranean. As subsequent allusions to “Mark’s lost hundred” and “the drowned tillage of Leonnoys” suggest, the sea in a very literal sense shapes and determines the limits of the Celtic maritime world Jones evokes. His poetry suggests that one way of reading the Tristan and Iseult legend is as a commemoration—Jones would say an *anamnesis*—of that interconnected coastal world. By retelling the legend through the centuries, the historical and cultural reality of the Breton-Cornish-Irish relationship is preserved and transmitted. The legend of Tristan and Iseult would increasingly haunt Jones’s imagination, leading to his extraordinary late painting *Trystan ac Essyllt*, its Welsh title drawing attention to the Brythonic origins of the myth, and its ships flying banners that display both Irish harp and British dragon.

Attending to the geographical particularities of Jones’s writing reveals the extent to which it offers a remapping of the British and Irish archipelago that balances local difference with cultural interconnectedness. Jones is one of those twentieth-century writers John Brannigan describes as writing, “as if the dominant narratives of political identity in these islands were already exhausted, and they sought to explore their peripheries—their seas, coastlines, and islands—for the cultural resources with which to re-imagine and re-calibrate their identities, cartographies, and ecologies.”²⁶ In reimagining the archipelago around a liminal space where the Celtic nations meet, Jones implicitly rejects Anglo-centric and imperial narratives of political identity. If Ireland is the source of a revitalized Celtic and Christian culture amidst the collapse of the Roman Empire, its political and cultural independence in the twentieth century provides a different kind of model for a resurgent Wales. For Jones, it is precisely those cultures that have been marginalized and oppressed that transmit authentic spiritual values. An archipelagic reading of Jones can situate his work in the wider context of such re-imaginings and re-calibrations, while laying the groundwork for appreciating the ecological implications of his devotion to the particularities of site and to sign and sacrament.

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NOTES

1. Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English*, 2.
2. Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 9-10.
3. Jones, "Art and Sacrament," 165.
4. Jones, "Preface," *Anathemata*, 17. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and the abbreviation, *TA*.
5. For recent accounts of the formation of early Wales and Scotland, see Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350-1064* and Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795*.
6. Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 10.
7. Tacitus, *Agricola*, section 30, 220-21.
8. Augustine, *City of God*, Book IV, section IV, 16-17.
9. Jones, "Wales and the Crown," 41; for a more recent, if brief, reassessment of the Cunedda legend, see Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350-1064*, 190, 359.
10. Jones, *The Sleeping Lord*, 82, 84.
11. *Ibid.*, 84.
12. *Ibid.*, 84-85.
13. *Ibid.*, 85.
14. Jones, *Wedding Poems*, 34.
15. Jones, "Wales and the Crown," 45.
16. *Ibid.*, 45.
17. Jones, "Wales and Visual Form," 65.
18. *Ibid.*, 65-66.
19. Jones, "Welsh Poetry," 63.
20. Jones, "The Myth of Arthur," 230-31.
21. Jones, "Wales and Visual Form," 72.
22. *Ibid.*, 72.
23. Jones, "The Myth of Arthur," 258.
24. *Ibid.*, 258.
25. *The Mabinogion*, 22-34.
26. Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism*, 17.

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DAVID JONES AND THE ANCIENT MARINER: A HISTORY OF FORGIVENESS

Thomas Berenato

The chief revelation of Thomas Dilworth's new biography of David Jones lies in the detailed record it makes of the pervasive consciousness of guilt under which this artist labored all his life. What Dilworth terms "psychologically toxic guilt feelings" arose in Jones's boyhood.¹ Jones's conversion to Catholicism in 1921, at age twenty-five, ratified rather than inspired his longstanding sense of living in a state of sin. Jones understood the human race to be implicated in an aboriginal calamity, but his alertness to the intermittences of tradition prevented him from taking for granted the transmissibility of original sin.² In other words, he felt that the Fall implies a fault but not a faultline running unbroken into the present. Jones withheld his subscription to Whig historiography. Progress he regarded as a "legend," world history, "a criminal dissipation of noble things."³ In Jones's view, guilt irradiates history, blurring and bending out of shape the arc of the moral universe on its way toward justice. But this predicament presents the artist with a *felix culpa*. An entry of 1944 in Jones's pocket diary notes the paradoxical thought that the "finality-of-obliteration-in-time...makes